Committee Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Australia's Immigration Detention Network

Dear Madam/Sir,

I wish to make comment relating to the forth-coming enquiry, specifically refering to 3 clauses only of the Terms of Reference.

(b). the impact of length of detention and the appropriateness of facilities and services for asylum.
My experience of visiting Australian Immigration Detention Centres extends over a number of years starting from about 2002 and to 2 different Centres. One Centre has been closed - Baxter IDC near Port Augusta. My visits to Maribrynong IDC span 9 months and is current - another visit is planned for Monday 8 August 2011.
Despite the difference of time, I am finding that the comments of the men that I speak to is no different: they know to the minute, almost, as to the length of time that they are being held in detention. "I am not a criminal" "I am human" "I want to be free" "First it was Christmas Island, then Darwin or Perth, now here [Maribrynong]"
This pre-occupation with counting the days of detention emphasises an abnormal pre-occupation of their mind.
I am often asked about the weather 'outside', with the asylum seeker refering to the type of clothing that I might be wearing. as the internal environment cuts them of completely from even the vagaries of each day's weather. The eternal 'daylight' conditions of being under artifical lighting and how the heating & cooling systems affects them

The fact that these men have been held in several IDC's there is no consistency of case management. "When I was on Christmas Island I saw a Case Manager every day, in Darwin, once a week, now it is seldom"
When I ask if they have seen a lawyer a vague reply is usually given. Often they aren't aware of when the next appointment will be.

Many have come from refugee camps in another country (Hazaras from Afghanistan but have left a Refugee Camp in Pakistan) and as the essential services to those camps are irregular, these men are unable to make regular contact with their respective wife and children by phone. The asylum seeker's worry is so acute in respect to how their family is coping because of their failure to not be able to financially support them as promptly as was expected and to give them hope that there will be a future time when they will be re-united.

My interaction with the various staff members of Serco at MIDC has been satisfactory under the terms that I have to comply with.

(d)health, safety and well-being of asylum seekers.
The impact of being in detention has a very big affect on their health and well-being.
My comments earlier about the effect that months & years in detention has on the asylum seeker's psyche: counting the days & months.
A number of the men at MIDC speak well of the opportunity to visit Foundation House, Melbourne, and the cousellors there.

As mentioned in the above (b) Terms of Reference, the incarceration has a huge impact on their well-being by the 'eternal daylight' that affects the detainees' circadian rhythm.

Certainly, experiences from their respective war-torn country at assaults that occur so often at night time can affect their sleeping patterns. But, this sleep in 'our day time' has been common for the detainees that I visited earlier at Baxter IDC as it is currently for those that I visit.
When I ask to see particular detainees during afternoon visiting hours, I am often told that they are sleeping
I am surprised as to how many say that they aren't hungry; one meal a day is all that they can manage. Yes, the food is pl;easing enough and culturally appropriate, I am told.

Materially the asylum seeker is being 'looked after' but their psychological health is so stressed. They have not sought to be in detention - "I left my village to be free" "I am not free here" "i am in a cage"

I ask what activities are they involved in and the usual response is that they are too weary to attend the gym, (referring to both physical & mental weariness), no there is no reason to go outside as they are surrounded by high steel fences which remind them of their incarceration.

The lack of case managers and lawyers to give these asylum seekers reassurance that their application is being attended to promptly weighs heavily on these men.

(q)length of time detainees have been held in the detention network.
Many have found the emotional ups & downs of being told that they are to be released , perhaps on a community detention order, but still are detained for weeks while they wait for an ASIO clearance almost too great to bear.
Comment in Terms of Reference (b) that each detainee knows the exact length of time that they have been held; that they have been shifted to different Immigration Detention Centres. The affect that having a variety of case managers & lawyers supposedly attending to their application is disturbing for them to repeat their reasons for seeking asylum when there appears little to no positive outcome.

I respectfully submit these comments
Yours sincerely
Margaret Tonkin

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